

**MINUTES OF THE BLACK BELT COMMISSION
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING
November 18, 2014
Arsenal Incubator - Selma, AL**

The Black Belt Commission Executive Committee met Tuesday, November 18, 2014, at the Arsenal Place Incubator, Selma. AL with Judge Robert Armstrong hosting the meeting. The following were in attendance:

Ron Sparks, Director, Alabama Rural Development Office
Bea Forniss, Division Chief, CED Division ADECA
Dave Dagostino, Vice-President of DentaQuest
Dr. David Hale, UAB
David Hooks, Chair, Manufacture Committee
John Zippert, Chair, Agriculture Committee
Carol Zippert, Chair, Cultural and Youth Committee
Donald Mills, Chair, Small Business Committee
Tyson Howard, South Central Alabama Regional Commission
Kennard Randolph, Congresswoman Terri Sewell's Office
Terri Sharpley Reynolds
Oscar Berry, Liaison, Congresswoman Terri Sewell's Office
William Scott, Co-Chair, Infrastructure Committee
Robert Lake, West Alabama Regional Commission
Ginger Stewart, Project Manager
Thomas Moore, Project Manager
Emily Law, BBC Executive Director
Judge Robert Armstrong, "Blue Jean" Selma
Dane Shaw, Arsenal Place Manager

Bea Forniss chaired the meeting and welcomed everyone. She then introduced **Judge Bob Armstrong** who spoke about the programs and projects currently in Selma. He told how 200 + people had a vision transformation idea. They asked themselves how they could address poverty. One way to address this is to start a business incubator and he explained that's what the building we are meeting in is. There's a Tshirt graphic design shop, a photographer studio/office and the Judge's son, **Robert Armstrong IV** who makes cookies that are being distributed in various outlets across the country such as Cracker Barrell. His goal is to make Selma the center of economic development in Alabama.

Judge Armstrong welcomed everyone and talked about "**Blue Jean Selma**" a project that began at 1st Presbyterian Church in Selma. It's an 8 a.m. Sunday service that embraces the "unloved" in Selma. All races, drug addicts, alcoholics, homeless and others who do not fit in. They now have their own building they are outgrowing with over 200 in attendance every Sunday.

Ron commented that we would be happy to help any way we could.

Carol Zippert asked about the financing of the project. Judge Armstrong said they had a small donation box in the church and so far, the project is being operated with funds from that box.

Ron announced that **Ken Tucker** is now head of UWA and congratulated him. Then he turned the meeting over to **Bea**.

The reports began with **John Zippert** and the Agriculture Committee.

COMMITTEE REPORTS:

AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE – John Zippert, Chair, reported –

- Nothing new to report, other than a tour of the building that was previously discussed is being planned.
- Ron stated he had a meeting in Tuskegee. He went back to see Dr. Hill.
- He also talked about the 100 loads of watermelons that were sold to Walmart this summer by the coop of farmers which is an outcome of this committee.

COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE – Dr. David Hale, Chair, Ginger Rue,

Project Manager, reported

- The state Broadband Ground Truth Project data collection has come to an end. The final report will be completed in December. Examples of areas on limited or no coverage include areas of Alabama HW 35 between Thomasville, Magnolia, Thomaston, Dayton, Faunsdale and Greensboro.
- The committee is also in the process of developing a web app for the Talladega US Forest Oakmulgee Division, including Perry and Dallas counties. The app will allow visitors to better understand what they are seeing as they travel the forest.
- Finally, the committee continues to work with the State Tourism Commission on a one-stop location providing information on outdoor trails for hiking, biking, paddling, equestrian activities and four-wheeling. The site provides information across the activities and includes information about amenities, local accommodations, restaurants, and outfitters.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE - Felecia Jones, Chair, Thomas Moore, Program Manager-

- Since last meeting, the committee partnered with TruFund and Norm Davis. in an effort to develop Small business academies
- Working on the South Central Alabama Broadband initiative

CULTURAL AND YOUTH – Dr. Carol Zippert, Chair, Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported –

- Reported they had been awarded \$100,000 for Arts in the Black Belt which serves twelve counties. It is important to involve as many community- based groups as possible as this is the focus of the committee.

- The Black Belt Community Foundation Grant is based on overall work that it does in the Black Belt.
- One group that we work with is the State Council on the Arts.
- The 4th weekend in August will be the 40th Anniversary of the Folk Roots Festival.
- Some people plan their homecoming activities around that time to attend.
- The committee invites other ideas.

EDUCATION COMMITTEE – Dr. Daniel Boyd, Chair, Ginger Stewart, Project Manager, reported:

- Dr. Boyd has resigned October 30th. At the Executive Committee's behest, John Heard, Superintendent of Perry County Schools, was asked to assume the role of committee chair. John Heard is not interested as he is already chair of the Education BBCF.
- Dr. Charles Nash was not interested in being chair.
- **Ron** talked about Dr. Boyd and his resignation and his case being postponed.
- Bea suggested we get something to give Dr. Boyd.
- It was suggested that we get a resolution signed by the Governor which we will do and arrange a time to present it to him.
- **Ron** talked about the “**Gear Up**” program. He reported he was excited about the grant. He was able to work with the University of Alabama- Birmingham. It will involve 9,000+ 6th and 7th grade students and their parents. When these children graduate, there will be scholarships available. He reported that the Governor is really excited about this.
- There were some suspicions about the program. All the Black Belt counties will be in the program. With additional applications, the program will probably last for ten to twenty years.
- Superintendents in this area were asked to be a part of it.
- A nutritional base was included in this grant.
- We were #10, now we are #8 in obesity and hypertension.

FAMILIES COMMITTEE- Dave Dagostino Chair, Ginger Stewart, Project Manager, reported:

- Major League Baseball and the National Football League have agreed to partner with the committee to hold events in the Black Belt. The MLB will hold events from March through July and the NFL will host events from September through December. These events will use sports as a vehicle to draw out families to events in order to find out what their needs are.
- Beginning in March, each Black Belt county will have an event.
- The committee is also looking into camps for youth with a former WNBA player. Both MLB and NFL have funds to give to communities and the committee needs volunteers to show support so that both organizations will be community involvement in the Black Belt.

- The committee is also investigating a partnership with “Bo Bikes Bama.” At **Ron Sparks’** request, we will contact Bo’s manager to request that Bo use a bamboo bike made in Greensboro.

HEALTH COMMITTEE — Congresswoman Terri Sewell and Chad Nichols, Co-Chairs, Oscar Berry reported:

- Oscar Berry with Congresswoman Sewell’s office discussed Health-related issues:
 1. The Affordable Care Act and how it has been a help to people in the area.
 2. Held enrollment event last Saturday.
 3. Talked about the SNAP Food and Nutrition Program

Ron commented that it might be good to get some public service advertising time on Live at 5 and we’d be glad to help with that. So many people are still confused about the ACA and 2015 is year that penalties will be applied.

Carol Zippert commented that it needed to be impressed upon Congresswoman Sewell that rural hospitals are closing. Also, there are still working families that still cannot afford insurance.

Ron talked about other states that have expanded Medicaid under another name This is something that needs to be put in front of Governor Bentley. I think he would be open to something with a different name.

John Zippert – State of Arkansas has same plan but with a different name. They came up with a roundabout way of doing this.

INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE – Noopie Cosby, Chair – William Scott, Co-Chair, and Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported:

- Bea Forniss stated that we would keep the recaptured funds. December and January funded at least four projects.
- They have changed the point system.
- We have partnered with DRA and ARC.

William Scott reported on a project he’s doing through his company Tristatz, LLC that connects the 14 counties in the Black Belt to create a Black Belt Information Hub. This is an inexpensive way to market all the positive resources, services, businesses and tourist attractions in each county to the world. This will include a 14 county information hub Website and phone app that tourist/visitors, local residents and county neighbors can access.

This will solve a major connectivity problem in the Black Belt through a new high-speed way to connect to the community, assist with job creation/job retention and economic growth. The Hub will promote the positive things in the county, connect citizens with resources in five minutes and connect new customers with businesses.

MANUFACTURING COMMITTEE – David Hooks, Chair, Candy Capel, Project Manager, reported-

- Reported the committee will meet December 9th with Billy Joe Camp as speaker.
- Each of our work overlaps to some degree. The Edge of Chaos working on two programs.
- Developing program to do research on health benefits of Pecans
- This could be a great opportunity for the Black Belt region as there are lots of pecans in the region.
- Approximately 11,000,000 pounds of pecans out of Alabama each year.
- Alabama is 4th leading state for pecan production.
- The city of Birmingham is part of 7th Congressional district so there are several things we are working on that we'll report later.

John Zippert asked if he was interested in encouraging small farmers who have a small orchard.

MARKETING & TOURISM –Wimberly Comer, Chair, Thomas Moore, Project Manager, reported on the following projects in progress: –

- ABBHA is creating their **7th Annual Alabama calendar for 2015** featuring Civil Rights sites in the Black Belt.
- Alabama's Front Porches released a **Christmas in the Black Belt** rack card (see attached).
- Planning with other states for the 2015 U.S. Highway 80 Yard Sale.
- Help the ABBHA achieve national designation to increase national exposure and federal funding to the region.
- **Alabama Black Belt Heritage Area created audio tours** across the region and placed on local websites in Marion and Demopolis. Additional tours are being developed in Selma, Livingston, Lowndesboro, Union Springs and Camden.
- ABBHA is creating new **interpretive panels** in Camden and Marion.
- Other tourism successes include the implementation of the **Black Belt Birding Trail which is meeting every other month to plan birding activities in the Black Belt.**
- Conduct **market research** of existing and potential visitors to the Black Belt to enhance marketing outreach to visitors. Share with partners in a series of workshops.
- **Create a monthly e-Newsletter** to keep partners aware of projects and events.
- Refresh **contact list** for regional tourism partners, share with organizations across the region.
- **Black Belt Treasures Outreach Initiative:** Enhance arts education/tourism in the Black Belt.
- **Downtown Walking Tours:** work with five local communities to develop downtown walking tour brochures. Greensboro, Marion and Selma Tours are in progress.

- **Websites:** Candace Johnson and Joe Watts are working with several Black Belt chambers to refresh their websites.

FUTURE PROJECTS:

1. **Southeastern Outdoor Press Association-** Alabama Black Belt Adventures won the bid to host the annual convention in the Black Belt in October 2015.
2. **Leadership FAM Tours:** Conduct FAM tours for Black Belt local leaders to explore successful tourism/community development projects in the region.
3. **Regional Website:** Create a new website that will provide interactive Black Belt itineraries.
4. **Annual Tourism Partner Planning Meeting:** Host an annual meeting for Black Belt tourism partners to discuss projects for the year.
5. **River Tours:** Support the development and promotion of Alabama River tours.

SMALL BUSINESS COMMITTEE – Donald Mills, Chair, Ginger Rue, Program Manager, reported:

- The Second Home grown Small Business Conference September 26, 2014 at Shelton State Community College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama was a huge success.
- Mr. Spurlin of Spurlin Shirt Shop in Tuscaloosa
- Mo Bridges of Mo's Bows met with the design class had several schools responded. 150 participants
- USDA provided Agricultural component.
- The committee is now finalizing the events calendar for 2015, including the Annual Youth Entrepreneurs' Summit.

SKILLS TRAINING AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT – Ed Castile, Chair/Dr. Ken Tucker, Co-Chair, Candy Cappel, Project Manager, Bobby Jon Drinkard -

- The Chair, Co-Chair, nor their representative was present.
- No report was given due to Candy's absence.

TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE – Shirley Worthington, Chair – Candy Capel, Project Manager, reported -

- No report

Bea talked about the project managers' compensation briefly and she assured Regional Councils and Project Managers that they would find the money and asked that they would continue to support the Project Managers and they would be compensated..

REGIONAL COUNCILS:

John Clyde Riggs, Alabama-Tombigbee Regional Commission:

- Not present.

Tyson Howard, South Central Alabama Development Commission reported:

- Talked about Exit 38 in Macon County. Did retail study to see what could be done.

- We are doing same thing for Lowndes County.
- Trying to entice retail to generate more taxes.
- Still doing Medicaid Waiver Program.

Bob Lake, West Alabama Regional Commission reported:

- The agency is helping seniors with Medicare Part D
- 1st day we saved them \$65,000
- If you know of anyone over 62, please tell them to come in
- We have a 1-800 number if you call in any problem you have.
- Agency has given away 140 heaters.
- **Bob** talked about the CSX train from Dallas. Also discussed applying for funds to deepen port in Mobile which will be open in January. Goods will be off loaded on trucks and trains. Norfolk Southern CSX will be making run in Meridian. We are not prepared for additional traffic coming in our area.

Ron and Bea` gave closing remarks and adjourned the meeting adjourned for a delicious lunch provided by Judge Robert Armstrong and Arsenal Place.